How Green are your winter greens? Is it worth the price you’re paying?

The emerald green color of turfgrass is definitely a sign of prestige. In general, golfers prefer a course with green turfgrass all year long. However, significant challenges and risks are involved when trying to achieve this color by overseeding a dormant bermudagrass turf for the winter. Trying to grow two aggressive turfgrasses in one location is practically impossible. That is why more serious consideration to overseeding alternatives is essential.

Fortunately, dormant brown bermudagrass is widely accepted by many golfers as a winter surface for tees, fairways, and roughs. Obviously, something has to be done for putting greens to provide green color. The only two options available at the present time are to overseed or to paint. Unfortunately, most courses are “set in stone” regarding the overseeding of putting greens.

For the largest number of these courses, however, painting would provide better greens. There are several advantages to painting as opposed to overseeding greens.

1. Inexpensive — It usually takes two paintings per winter to provide the desired dark green color. The cost involved with supplies and labor to apply the paint is approximately equal to the cost of seed. However, if the cost of maintaining an overseeded turf during the season is factored into the equation, such as the extra mowing, fertilizer, water, fungicides, etc., it is significantly more cost efficient to paint!

2. Attractiveness — In most areas of the Southeast, bermudagrass is dormant for approximately 12 to 14 weeks between mid-December and early March. Successful programs include painting greens in two directions immediately after the bermudagrass first enters dormancy. It usually takes one or two days to carefully spray the paint on all of the greens. Contrary to popular belief, painting isn’t messy! It dries quickly and will last about 60 days before another single coat is reapplied. Paint won’t rub off on the golfers’ clothing, either. The paint is such an attractive substitute that most golfers can’t tell the difference, as shown in the left photograph.

3. Healthier Bermudagrass — Overseeding has several serious negative side effects for the permanent bermudagrass. During winter and spring, the overseeded turf will thrive by stealing water, sunlight, and nutrients from bermudagrass. The canopy shade is especially detrimental because of the high light requirement of bermudagrass. Sometimes, with today’s heat-tolerant varieties, the canopy shade of overseeding may persist for 8 to 9 months. An overseeding lasting this long will cause bare areas to appear in the bermudagrass during spring transition. If cold temperatures should occur, this major stress coupled with golfer traffic and the competition from the overseeding could cause major winter bermudagrass damage. Painted greens have taller bermudagrass turf, which is less susceptible to low-temperature injury. Also, on cold nights, most courses cover their painted greens with gray geotextile blankets to protect the dormant bermudagrass from freezing temperatures. Another major advantage is that without overseeding to interfere with his observations, the superintendent can focus on maintaining the health of the bermudagrass. Thus the superintendent is able to react more quickly to disease or injuries.

4. Better Playability — Painting provides the smoothest fall and winter putting surface possible for the golfers. Most golfers are frustrated each fall with the messy conditions of taller turf and frequent irrigations during the establishment of an overseeding. In the spring, extra aeration, vertical mowing, topdressing, fertilizing, etc., are required during transition to get rid of the overseeding and to encourage new bermudagrass growth. More lost revenue and golfer dissatisfaction result at this time. In contrast, the painted surface provides a smooth and enjoyable playing surface for a longer period of time each season. Moving hole locations more frequently to distribute golfer traffic and occasionally rolling to reduce spike marks are extra winter measures to enhance painted greens.

It is surprising to me that painting has not been used to a greater extent, since over 100 golf course superintendents across the South have proven that paint is an alternative to live green grass. In our dynamic turfgrass industry, new ideas which can enhance both our golf courses and our environment deserve serious consideration today. Painting greens is effective, inexpensive, and attractive. All it takes is to paint ‘em green!